

Book Review

Gøsta Esping-Andersen: *The Incomplete Revolution: Adapting to Women's New Roles*

Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009, 214 pp.

In contrast to what the title suggests, this book is not primarily about politics and gender, but about social inequality and the welfare state. At first glance, this volume seems to be little different from Esping-Andersen's earlier books. Yet it is, and the main novelty concerns the author's effort to bring in demography in order to understand how inequalities accumulate over the life course. The book starts out with the argument that research on income inequality has exaggerated the influence of globalization and technology, all the while neglecting the impact of massive shifts in demography. These shifts primarily relate to women's changing behaviour with respect to education, marriage, family, domestic work, and career dedication. In Esping-Andersen's words, we have experienced nothing less than a 'female revolution' as women's life course has become increasingly masculinized. Not only is it the case that new cohorts of women increasingly embrace a lifelong commitment to employment. The transformation also spills over to decisions regarding marriage—couples becoming increasingly similar in terms of human capital—, fertility and the domestic sphere, where women have significantly reduced and men have little by little increased their investment in home production.

However, the 'revolutionary' change in women's role is still incomplete and contemporary societies thus are, according to Esping-Andersen, suspended between two equilibria. A first equilibrium crystallizes around the traditional nuclear family with the male as the breadwinner and the female as the homemaker. Post-war classics considered this model of strong gender specialization as the End of History: for Talcott Parsons it was the maturation of the modernization process, for Gary Becker the most efficient organization of family welfare. Yet, this seemingly stable arrangement has come under pressure from a rival model: Women's quest for higher education, economic autonomy, and life-time dedication to paid work has profoundly reshaped family life and given rise to what Esping-Andersen calls the 'gender-equality equilibrium'. Its emergence is illustrated, on the one hand, by women's improved educational attainment

and increasing labour market attachment, and on the other by husbands' growing contribution to housework.

The gender-equality equilibrium is steadily expanding in the Western World. Yet Esping-Andersen's analysis of time use and income data recalls that it is far from being dominant. The post-war male-breadwinner, female-housewife equilibrium continues to describe the life of about a third of Americans and Southern Europeans and perhaps a tenth of Scandinavians. Crucially, a large fraction of people falls in-between the two equilibria. While they have left behind the *Ancien Régime* of clear-cut gender division, they have not yet fully embraced a model of dual careers and shared home production. Accordingly, they are caught in an unstable equilibrium, which is not only based on unclear normative standards but also associated with suboptimal outcomes, among others much lower actual than desired fertility. More importantly, and this is the book's key argument, as long as the transformation towards gender equality is incomplete, this very process is bound to increase inequalities.

Why should the evolution towards greater gender equality lead to social polarization? The reason is that the dual-career norm has primarily been adopted by women from the privileged classes, making it largely a 'middle-class affair' (p. 169). Hence, highly educated women have increased their labour supply to a much greater degree than low-educated women since the 1980s—an evolution that has significantly contributed to the rise of income inequality. In parallel, marital similarity in terms of social class has grown as women in higher grade occupations increasingly marry men employed in similar high-status jobs. Not surprisingly then, these high-skilled double-earner couples race ahead of the rest, whereas joblessness is widespread among couples at the bottom of the education distribution.

The female revolution may thus reduce inequality *within* the household, but increase inequality *between* households. Worryingly, this demography-driven growth in income inequality also spills over to children's mobility prospects. Esping-Andersen shows that inequality in parents' monetary and time investment in their children widened over the last decades. Time-use data from Denmark, Spain, and the United States suggest that highly educated parents dedicate a fourth to a third more time to their children than low-educated parents. The discrepancies in life chances thus seem to widen

along a series of linked factors: family income, spending on children, and both the quantity and quality of parenting.

This troublesome evolution calls for welfare state reform—a project whose contours Esping-Andersen outlines in the book's second half. The reform should ensure that children have equal life chances and simultaneously bridge Europe's large gap between the desired and the actual number of children. To achieve these two goals, it is paramount that motherhood be reconciled with employment in such a way as to minimize women's loss of life-time income due to children. This implies paid maternity-cum-parental leave with job security, generous child allowances, an individual taxation regime, and access to non-family home help for the elderly. The corner stone of Esping-Andersen's reform agenda is, however, access to affordable quality childcare. Based on recent findings that cognitive and socio-emotional foundations of learning are laid in early childhood, Esping-Andersen argues that the roots of unequal life chances are buried in the pre-school ages—all the more so because schools are ill-equipped to remedy a bad start. Accordingly, welfare states need to invest in families with children. This investment primarily consists—alongside government transfers aimed at eradicating child poverty—in universal access to childcare. Esping-Andersen thus points out the paradox that family well-being in modern society presupposes 'defamilization': Where external welfare state arrangements help families to care for their children and their elderly, inter-generational ties as measured with the frequency of interactions between grandparents, parents, and children seem stronger and fathers' time investment into their offspring greater.

State subsidies for universal day-care coverage do not come cheap: Denmark's universal day-care system for children under six years costs an equivalent of almost two per cent of GDP. A frequently advocated solution is to downsize pensions in order to redistribute public resources from the elderly towards the young. In the book's final chapter, Esping-Andersen convincingly argues that this is an intellectual fallacy. To begin with, pushing a part of the retired back into poverty simply shifts the financial burden from the state towards families. Moreover, if budget cuts also concern public services for the elderly, greater demand for familial care will translate into lower female employment and hence less tax revenues. Most importantly, the warning of an impending clash between generations ignores the large extent of *intra-generational* inequality: 'death is not democratic: the rich live far longer than the poor and this produces huge inequalities within each retirement generation' (p. 147). Instead, Esping-Andersen proposes

a series of more equitable measures to come to grips with the costs of population ageing. More generally, he insists that securing pensions in 2050 essentially depends on the productivity of the then active cohorts. Accordingly, 'retirement reform must begin with babies' (p. 162). The idea is that investment into early childhood yields high returns: Quality day care and early schooling not only boost women's labour supply and thus reduce child poverty. More crucially, they also improve and homogenize children's cognitive stimulation and educational attainment and thus raise future productive potential.

Hence, the macro-economic costs of investing in children seem bearable. In contrast, the absence of welfare state support for children may be costly in the long run. It not only leaves rising inequalities unchecked, but also complicates the reconciliation of motherhood with work. The result is not very attractive: too few children, too few hours worked by women, too narrow a tax base, and persisting inequalities in children's life chances.

With *The Incomplete Revolution*, Esping-Andersen has embarked on the ambitious project of bringing in the family to explain unequal life chances. By and large, this enterprise is crowned with success. Three qualities of the book are particularly noteworthy. First, there is a considerable amount of conceptual originality as the author brings together the literature from sociology, demography, and economics. Second, Esping-Andersen tries to empirically support his arguments whenever possible; his narrative thus rests on countless statistical analyses of income data, time-use surveys, household panels, and Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) scores. Finally, the book strives to be directly relevant to policy-making; hence, it lucidly engages with ongoing political debates and, unlike many other scholars, does so in a language easily accessible to practitioners and undergraduate students.

One major criticism of this book relates to the overwhelming weight Esping-Andersen places on early childhood as the crucial period when inequalities are formed. Compared with the massive effect attributed to childcare, the long years spent in the educational system are virtually blended out. The idea that the die of inequality is already cast in pre-school years seems not only unappealing from a philosophical point of view. More importantly, it also takes little note of the research showing the powerful effect that parents' class has on adolescents' educational choices *independent of their school performance* (e.g. Erikson and Jonsson, 1996). Likewise, the finding that social origin is more closely linked with educational attainment at younger rather than older ages clearly suggests that schooling affects

equality above and beyond the pre-school years (e.g. Blossfeld and Shavit, 1993). Yet, despite the weak case it makes regarding educational systems, there is little doubt that *The Incomplete Revolution* strongly enhances our understanding of the making and unmaking of unequal life chances. And last but not least, it is a surprisingly entertaining read.

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